

Guided Discussion: Building Visual Resource Professional Capacity and Community

Discussion to be led by Robert Sullivan, Visual Resource Scientist, Argonne National Laboratory, and James Palmer, Scenic Resource Consultants

Like any profession, visual resource management and planning relies in part on a foundation of professional principles and standards, accepted practices and methods, and research and development activities. Fundamental to the healthy development of all of these is a community of practitioners that share ideas and opinions, review and critique each other's work, collaborate to obtain funding and conduct projects, share research and project information, identify principles and set standards where appropriate, and importantly, advise and learn from each other. Critical to the health of the community of practitioners is education at the university level, which leads to a common understanding of the scientific and professional knowledge required for competent practice. And finally, critical to the profession and our shared goal of informed and effective visual resource management is support from outside the profession, including support from the public, support from advocacy groups, and from government agencies and leaders to ensure that visual resource concerns are adequately considered in land and water resource planning and decision making.

In the U.S., visual resource professionals are few in number, and widely scattered. The discipline covers many topic areas. Some of us work in relative isolation. Most of us either work for federal and state agencies, in private practice, or at universities, but there is not always good information exchange between these groups. These circumstances make effective communication and collaboration difficult, but it is important to achieve the best quality in our work, and to our success as individuals and as a profession. There is a cost associated with the lack of cohesion in our community. Too many of us are working on the same problems without knowledge of each other's work. In an era of tightening budgets, we may be missing opportunities for cost-effective collaboration. Important research needs are unmet. We lack standards and accepted practices and methods in a critical time for our profession, as our national landscapes and seascapes are being transformed by energy development, climate change and other forces. While there is public support for visual resources, there are few advocates for our profession and its goals. We have no dedicated professional society, and the principles and methods we use are taught in relatively few educational institutions.

This guided discussion session will be devoted to discussing how we can build a stronger and more effective community of practice that fosters the sound development and functioning of the key elements of the foundation described above. We will present the results of an online survey of conference attendees that asks questions about their perceived needs for better information dissemination regarding visual resource issues and better communication with peers. The survey also asks about preferences for various approaches and communication tools that could be used to foster the sharing of ideas, research results, opportunities, advice, and knowledge. Lastly, the survey asks about the perceived need for an organization for visual resource professionals.

After presenting the survey results, we will discuss possible paths forward to take action (if it is desirable) to employ one or more of the approaches or tools discussed in the survey, or others we identify. We will address the key challenges that have thwarted similar efforts in the past. Desired outcomes of this preliminary discussion are a short list of candidate approaches/tools, and a list of people willing to participate in developing a plan to implement at least one of them.